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## THE AFTERNOON CANTEEN

By GUENN F. NEWNHAM

OUTSIDE the rain blattered the windows and the wind tore at the doorways as a terrier digs rats, lifting up a protesting voice at intervals with a blast that shook the building.

The last half hour of the afternoon shift at the Soldiers' Club is a very long one as a rule. The Army Pay Department, whose appearance for their brief tea interval keeps us pleasantly busy for twenty minutes or so, have finished their meal and a hurried smoke and departed. The washing up is done, the china stacked away, plates replenished, and the tea urn removed. A short warm up at the blazing fire, a twitch in passing at wry table cloths as the papers are gathered up and put back on the reading table, and the servers drift back to their chairs and their knitting again, as they sit down to await the six o'clock relief.

We are all a little tired, though the wet day has not been inducive of custom, and the talk dies down to low-voiced chat between two and two; all the latest rumours were discussed early in the afternoon.

For the next hour there will not be much custom, until the room begins to fill again for the concert. The few Tommies who drop in go for the most part straight to the reading or writing table. In one corner a game of draughts is in progress; two or three men lean over the players, pulling thoughtfully at their pipes, a youngster whispers to his comrade and bursts into sudden laughter. The purr of the electric fan mingles with the soft crackling of the fire.

It is during this slack interval that one has time to get into conversation with the men who stroll in to scan the letter board, or loiter over a belated tea at one of the deserted tables. Direct question is not of much avail, if one wants a modicum of truth. The average Tommy is both shy and suspicious, and delights in seeing how much the weaker sex will swallow without flinching. Many can be early choked off by a minute description of the course of the bullet "which went in just here, miss—you can see the scar—and come out here, after a little bit of a journey like"; or by the exhibition of a matchboxful of bone splinters which are still working their way out of a shattered arm, to be kept by the proud owner as a "souvenir," together with the English bullet which buried itself in his pack during the crossing of one of those debatable lands where English and German ammunition mingles equally, and the traveller goes soft and warily. But sometimes they will talk a little.

"Our young lootenant, 'e wanted to take us acrost at the double," says one man, with a chuckle, speaking of these same debatable lands. "But our captain 'e'd said to me first-like, 'You're 'is servant,' 'e says, 'you'd better go up with 'im an' see as 'e gets through all right.' So I says to 'im, 'At the double, sir? Why, good Lord, sir, you wouldn't 'ave no men left at the end. Best keep all on like this.'

"What, this pace?' 'e says. It was 'is first time under fire.

"Best so, sir,' I says.

"Never no faster?' 'e says. An' I says, 'No, sir.' Oh! you can't 'elp laughing now; but it wasn't no laughing matter at the time, with the bullets zip, zip, zip, like angry wasps all around us. But we come safe to the trenches, till just the last one of our lot, 'e throws up 'is 'ands.

"Well, I've stopped one for you,' 'e says, an' drops. Our young gentleman, 'e was proper upset about it."

"Yes," joins in a clear-complexioned boy of about twenty-four who is just going across for the third time. "'Tisn't the trenches; you're right enough when you get there. It's the getting there, an' the waitin' about at the base."

"It's the moonlight nights," adds a third, anxious to put in his share. "They can see the shadow at the loop-hole, an' they fire at the least chance. There was my pal now; it was a bright night when 'e was 'it. 'E must 'ave moved a bit, an' they see the shadow. Caught 'im fair on the forehead, the bullet did, an' parted 'is 'air up the middle. We took 'im up for dead, but 'e's all right now, an' working in munitions. 'Is 'ead's a bit dizzy still, but it's parted 'is 'air proper."

It was nearer 6.30 than 6 by this time, and the relief arrived a little breathless and bustling, depositing hot pies and puddings on the table, and testing the heat of the teapot under the dilapidated cosy, as the afternoon shift hurried into its wraps.

Outside the rain had given over for the moment, and a fresh wind was blowing. Had the night been fine there would have been a moon; even as it was there was a brightness behind the thick dark cloud-drift which showed up the wet pavements and gleaming puddles. A soft flurry of footsteps went by in the dimness, and a man, rounding the corner hurriedly, left a little fiery trail of sparks from his cigarette behind him.

At the telegraph board a little knot of people were gathered, shouldering and shifting as first one, then another, joined the group or dropped out again. Further up the street someone stopped to light his pipe, sheltering the match in his hands, and with a startling suddenness a face flared out of the darkness, to vanish again as suddenly. From the higher ground behind the town a long feeler from the searchlight shot out, probing purposefully.—*The Queen, London.*

## THE MOST COMPLETE ANGLER

BY GEORGES COURTELIN

*(Dawn, on the bank of the stream)*

M. POMMADE (*making ready his line*). Oh, hang it! The wind is in the North this morning. As these are not conditions under which I can work, I shall have a poor time. Happily . . . (*He throws his line. The cork sinks immediately. He*

*draws in quickly and lands a barbel.*) One! (*He frees the fish and throws it back into the water. That done, he throws his line again. The same thing happens as before, and the same barbel appears.*) Two! (*The barbel freed is put back and again*